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ABSTRACT

In the context of a professional-development reform movement in Quebec, the Ministry of Education asked universities to participate in the training of school principals so that they could implement a culture of continuous learning in their own schools. The university researchers used a bottom-up approach to initiate collaborative inquiry with 37 principals interested in learning about action research. The researchers modeled collaborative inquiry with the principals by reflecting on their own practice so that the principals could implement the practice with their own staffs and become learning partners. The paper proposes a definition of bottom-up collaborative inquiry and describes a 2-year study within which principals developed support groups with the help of the university researchers. The principals learned and experimented with new ways to relate with their staff in the context of school renewal. Additionally, the principals' leadership practices changed through several action-reflection cycles within an action-research context. (Contains 24 references.) One figure is included. (LMI)

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Collaborative Inquiry With School Principals to Implement a Continuous Learning Culture

ABSTRACT

In the context of a movement to reform professional development in Québec, the Ministry of Education has asked Universities to be involved in the training of School Principals so they could implement, in their own environment, a culture of continuous learning. The researchers who became involved in such a project decided to use a bottom-up approach in order to initiate a collaborative inquiry with Thirty-Seven School Principals interested to learn about action research as a means to foster professional development. The researchers have developed a sensitivity to collaborative inquiry as a strategy for organizing and conducting professional development. They tried to model collaborative inquiry with the principals by reflecting on their own practice so the principals could do the same thing with their staff and in doing so become learning partners.

This paper will propose a definition of a bottom-up collaborative inquiry and will describe a two-year study within which School Principals developed support groups with the help of university researchers. In doing so, they learned and experimented with new ways to relate with their staff in the context of school renewal. The paper will also present evidence that their leadership practices as principals were affected through several action-reflection cycles within an action research context.

Introduction

The concern to implement change in education is not new. In the fifties, Paul Mort suggested that we analyze the specific dynamics and the particular rythms of educational changes. Forty years later, it seems possible to identify four trends that have influenced the way we articulate change in education. These trends sometimes have dominated and, sometimes, have overlapped or been found together.

The first trend, called here *epidemiological* (1950-1970), saw change as a direct consequence of diffusion and transfer of knowledge. It was considered important to move information around so that it could reach the people for whom it would be significant. Research was oriented towards the development of new solutions to well defined problems and people could access different influence circles to find out about it. Training, was seen as showing people how to use the latest solution proposed by research.

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The second trend, called *rational* (1965-1983), saw change as the result of a logical relationship between the proponents of change and its proposed beneficiaries. Contrary to the first trend where people considered change as some kind of result following a process or as a product and considered training as a practice period to allow the learners to master the object of study, the second trend recognized that there was a large gap between the research results and the solution that can be implemented by the practitioners. Often, the teachers did not see how to translate the theoretical answers into their practice and had to be helped to make the links between the theoretical knowledge available and the practical knowledge guiding their practice. This trend gave rise to the emergence of training centers where people aimed at establishing and showing these links between theory and practice. Teachers were invited to observe how others were transfering solutions into practice and their effect on learning. It was hoped that by being witnesses to this demonstration they would be able to incorporate the new approaches into their practice. The *rational* trend can be summarized as this: what is observed as supportive of educational success will be accepted by any individual who claims to be a competent and responsible professional. It was the period of "grandiose" changes: entire systems were invited to transform themselves following edicts from the Ministry of Education.

The third trend is the one called *systemic* (1975-1992). In this trend, people interested in change considered it as an objective, a desirable state. They did not see it as being static as it was in the first two trends, but as evolving, transforming itself at the same time that people clarified their understanding. Change was not seen as an isolated event but as a process that could be understood in its complexity and ever changing nature. This process was owned by the actors in a particular environment and the resource persons, outside the system, were seen as collaborators and their role was to help the actors to solve given problems.

The fourth trend, the trend of chaotic systems (1990 - today), puts the emphasis on the fuzzy and emerging nature of systems and on their problems. The new attitude towards change is the one of the surfer who does not try to control the wave but to foresee its direction and its height and who tries to follow it when it breaks. The target of change is the system as well the individual in his/her system. Within this trend, the concern is to investigate how change is appropriate, how this appropriation translates into practice but also how the system develops new approaches to problem solving and how a new organisational culture is implemented as a consequence.

Looking at the four trends, it is possible to identify two constant strategies for bringing about change: research and training. Their ratio has not always been the same. They were sometimes seen as two steps that followed each other or sequential activities (eg. in the epidemiological and rational trends where research was seen to generate knowledge and training followed to implement it). Sometimes they were seen as simultaneous and iterative (eg. in the systemic and chaotic systems trends) where research was seen as the beginning of change, but also as a strategy that could generate its own learning). It is this relation between research and learning that is our interest. How can research be a stimulus for change and what kind of changes are most likely to happen as a result of different types of research? (Savoie-Zajc & Dolbec, 1994)

Action research includes the notion of research, action and learning. Reason (1994) attributed two objectives to participative action research. The first was to generate knowledge and provide useful ideas to guide the actions of the people involved in the research. The second was to empower them in becoming more aware of what they knew as well as how they practiced in order to improve it. For us, action research is also seen as a strategy to bring about change (CSE, 1995; Chevrier, 1994).

We will illustrate how we are trying to implement change through action research by describing the second year of a project that involves School Principals in participatory action research. The School Principals became co-researchers with us at the beginning of the inquiry. They were involved in defining the problem and they have continuously negotiated their roles during the research. The research has encouraged all of us to become learners and to explore the collective action research/learning process as well as each of our individual processes.

The Action Research Context

In Quebec, following recommendations of different stakeholders (the Teachers' Union, the Federation of School Boards, the Superior Council of Education), the Ministry of Education legislated that teacher in-service training would become the responsibility of School Principals (MEQ, 1993, 1995). According to the Ministry, it would be the job of the principals to work with the teachers they were supervising to develop a training plan and to facilitate its implementation as well as to support the transfer of learning into teachers' practice. The goal was to empower the teachers and the School Principals to develop appropriate continuous learning projects that responded to the teachers' needs and at the same time maintained coherence with the school

objectives. This change was very important. Fortin and Gélinas (1994) have described the issues coming into play in this movement towards a continuous learning culture. Up to then, the teachers had decided themselves what kind of in-service training they required and had selected what was on offer in the training workshops put forward by their School Board. The school team was not involved in the decision-making process. Most often the School Principals were kept away from the management of their teachers training projects and were not consulted very much in the establishment of collective training put in place by their School Board Educational Services. In the new guidelines, the Ministry of Education decided to place the continuous training responsibility where it belonged: at the school level so that each school could renew itself in the light of its own culture and goals. The ministry expected the School Principals to play a new role: to facilitate the development, the coordination and the implementation of the training plans.

It is in this context that action research was initiated with School Principals to support them in the implementation of a culture of continuous learning in their schools. Organisational culture may be defined as how the members of an organisation think and solve problem within a common approach (Grimmett & Crehan, 1992; Hannay, 1995). The transfer from an external and centralized needs identification process to a more local level of responsibility facilitated by the School Principal constituted an important change. It involved transformations to individual and collective values. The individual right of a teacher who wanted to register for a particular programme was now considered in the light of the collective needs of the school which needed to have a vision and a direction to guide each of its members' practice. This implied the need for a collaborative culture that had to be nurtured (Hargreaves, 1991). This change was also taking place alongside the professionalization of teachers, with its new philosophy of continuing professional development. This explains why any training project that wished to support such a continuous learning dynamic must take place in a context where needs can emerge: needs that are nor static and unchangeable but fuzzy and continuously adapted through the training.

Action research constituted the framework through which the authors worked with the School Principals to explore with them the notions of participative management, emerging leadership and the management of change. Action research was also the change strategy that the principals adopted. After a year and a half, some principal have already adopted action research into their staff development strategies.

Description of the Study

In summer 1994, one the the two authors was informed of the new training programme put forward by the Ministry of Education. Its objective was to train the School Principals to assume a role of leadership with their school team to facilitate the involvement of everybody in the continuous learning process. Interested by the programme, the authors designed a strategy and core values that could be used to develop a training programme and presented their project to the regional meeting that groups the General Directors of eight School Boards. The School Boards expressed their interest in registering their School Principals for the training. The authors suggested that they visit all the School Boards of West Quebec to present the project to the principals of Primary and Secondary Schools. Seven out of eight School Boards agreed to this. The person in charge of the programme for the Regional Section of the Ministry of Education accompanied us during our visits. It took three months to visit approximately 150 School Principals.

Our Values and Theoretical Framework

During our meetings with the Principals, we proposed a training process that was grounded in principles agreed with the General Directors (a bottom-up approach and collaborative action research) as well as in the information given to us by the Regional Section of the Ministry of Education and our knowledge of change theories. The process that we proposed would consist of two phases. The first phase would be of three one-day group meetings to get to know each other and develop a common terminology. The themes to be examined would be: leadership, change process and action research as a change strategy. This would be followed by a second phase in which the larger group would be divided in smaller groups and where the participants would talk about their individual intervention in their own school.

The values and principles guiding our action research fit very well with those recognized by Fortin and Gélinas (1994) and Pelletier (1996). Our values and principles can be described as follow:

> We believe that the School Principals are experienced professionals and that they have a deep knowledge of their respective work environment. Any training must therefore rest on their experience and accumulated knowledge.

This principle explains why our project was grounded in andragogical principles. We were hoping to help the School Principals reflect on their experience as school managers. Each one coming

from a different milieu would have an opportunity to explore with his/her team their own problematical context and initiate a collaborative process with their school team to generate a continuous learning process that answered their particular needs. The project would involve us in clarifying their management values and implementing plans to put them into practice.

> We believe that experiential learning is suitable to adults in learning situations. They are able to reflect on their past and present actions and relate the learning gained through experimentation to their conceptual scheme of reference.

The people involved in the training would be able to develop and implement their own learning plans taking into consideration the reality of their own school. They would also be able to benefit from the presence of colleagues engaged in a similar process.

> We recognize that any practice is by nature a public activity. It should be understood and shared in order to be improved. We believe that it is through sharing, discussion, texamining contradictions between what one says and what one does, and other people's criticism, that we can renew or modify our own actions.

We planned the training sessions so that we could model the training practices that we hoped the principals would adopt. The structure of the meetings could also be used as a model to be replicated by the School Principals in their schools if they wished. We would live with them what we asked them to implement with their school teams. We believed that the School Principals should initiate an inquiry into their own practice before they tried to interest their colleagues in examining their practice.

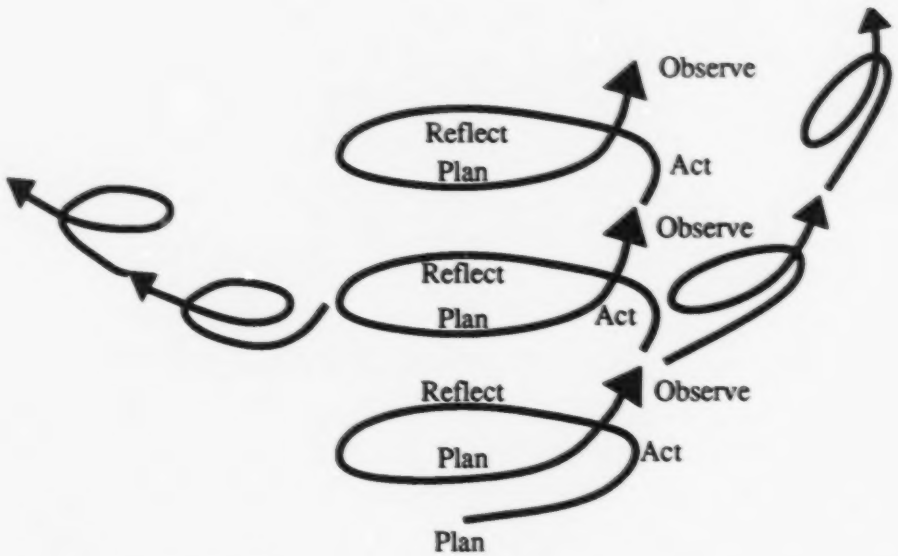
The Model and the Training Strategies

The McNiff (1988) action research model was chosen to illustrate what we meant when we talked about action research. It shows a cyclical process consisting of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. The reflection allows the actor-researcher to modify his or her original plan in the light of his observations.

Following the model, we had designed a research project that consisted of two phases and the first action was to present it to the School Principals who would voluntarily join us if they were interested by such an endeavor. Thirty seven of them showed an interest in participating in the project on the condition that we tailored it to their needs. This allowed us to plan the design by taking into account their time constraints as well as their claimed knowledge about leadership.

The following changes were suggested:

The project should last twelve months instead of six as previously planned. The first phase would take one day instead of three because the principals said thet they did not need to review leadership and change theories. This amended plan was presented to two groups of School Principals. One group was composed of all the principals working in a single School Board. The other group was made of principals from four different School Boards. An action research contract was agreed between us. Both groups accepted the idea that we would try to model together what they could themselves do with their school team. The two of us, as facilitators of the process, would also use a collaborative action research approach to monitor and learn from our practice.



The project was based on voluntary participation and we started with thirty seven participants out of a possible 150. The group coming from the same School Board averaged twenty one participants since the beginning. The other group has seen its number fluctuate. It started with 16 participants and seven left during the first year for apparently different reasons (lack of time, too much a distance to travel).

We decided to meet three times from February to June 1995 and three other times from September to December 1995. In order to let the process remain open, only the first day would be planned according to the following themes: leadership, change theories and action research. The remaining days would be planned at the end of the first day in the light of the needs emerging from our discussions. Part of the plan was a monitoring process that would help us to replan the project after each one-day meeting. After each meeting, a feedback sheet was handed out to further our reflection as well as to evaluate the process and provide directions for the following meeting. In December 1995, after a year in the project, we evaluated it by asking our co-researchers to complete a questionnaire to assess to what extent the original training objectives were reached. Among the questions asked were the following:

> 1° The goal of the project was to help the School Principals to learn and develop a reflective and collaborative approach. Such an approach could be used to support the teachers in order to establish a learning community in their school. To what extent has this objective been reached?
>
> 2. The intervention wanted to start from the participants' experience. To what extent has this objective been reached?
>
> 3° The intervention aimed at allowing each of the participants to share their experience in order to validate it and to maintain coherence between values and actions. To what extent has this objective been reached?
>
> 4. After a year in the project, can you identify what you learned? What kind of evidence you can provide to support your claim? What was the impact of the training on your practice?

The answers were collected to be analysed later by the facilitators. A discussion was then recorded during which every principal shared the need to continue to meet regularly with the action research group, at least until June 1996, when the situation will be reassessed.

How can we, as facilitators, manage such a training process and respect our values and theoretical principles at the same time? The planning phase must consider the situational dynamic: from meeting to meeting, we must diagnose any emerging need and try to address it. We also have to develop the training process around our main objective which is to transform our practice and attitudes in order to bring about change in our institutions. The training process must be grounded in each person's experience and understanding so that each of us feels confident to implement some change in our respective institutions.

Our model of action research relies upon a diagnosis of needs that follows a circular process through which it is possible to take into account the evolution of the needs of the individuals in the group. Moreover, the planning phase becomes a shared responsibility between the facilitators and the participants. We are all there to learn and to improve our practice. As facilitators coming from the university, we join the principals in the effort to translate into our practice the values and the theoretical models that we espouse. We are all there to become more aware of our values and espoused theories and we are challenged to implement them in practice. Each of us is trying to become a better manager of the learning process and can influence the evolution of the learning group.

One of the training strategies used in the action research is the design conversation (Jenlink and Carr, 1996) or dialogue (Isaacs, 1996) which constitutes a collective learning and research experience as well as an opportunity for a group to explore the postulates underlying the common experience of the group members. The strength of dialogue as a training strategy resides in its capacity to lead to the emergence of a community of people who participate in the creation of meaning relevant to the collectivity. The conversation mode appeared to be essential to reach our objective which was to allow the participants to develop relationships among each other and to continue the sharing outside the planned formal meetings in order to develop human networks that would provide help, support, influence even after the training project. It is through the implementation of these human networks that the change objective should be gradually met. The establishment of a learning culture (Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991) is an opportunity for change which is located within the change of values.

A second learning strategy was the use of written material selected by the resource persons according to the themes targeted by the participants. For example, Fullan (1993) and Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) on the process of change; Mc Niff (1992), Whitehead (1993), Dolbec and Savoie-Zajc (1994) and Cunningham (1993) on action research; Kouzes and Posner (1987) on leadership. The principals were asked to read them before the meetings and to share with each other the questions and reflections that they generated.

Provisional Evaluation of the Action Research

The principles used by Lomax (1994) can be used to validate our claim that this project is meeting the criteria of action research. According to her, there are five principles that read as follow:

1) Action research is about seeking improvement by intervention.
2) Action research involves the researcher as the main focus of the research.
3) Action research is participatory and involves others as co-researchers rather than informants.
4) Action research is a rigorous form of inquiry that leads to the generation of theory from practice.
5) Action research needs continuous validation by "educated" witnesses from the context it serves.

After working for a year and a half with two groups of School Principals, we have collected a vast amount of data through audio recordings, feedback from a research assistant who observed our interventions and, as mentioned earlier, written comments provided by the Principals that were collected after each meeting. An analysis of the data provides a partial assessment of the action research. It is possible to differentiate the learnings at several levels: 1) the co-researchers learnings, 2) our personal learnings as researchers, 3) action research as a strategy to bring about change and 4) the concept of continuous learning as a means to transform the organisational school culture.

1) <u>The learnings of the School Principals as co-researchers</u>

The training needs have changed since the first meeting. We have already stated in a previous paper that there was a shift in their training focus during the first months of the research: the principals initial motivation was to get new tools to work *for* the teachers. As the session progressed, our diaries show that we quickly noticed that both groups quickly moved in their learning perspectives to see themselves as main beneficiaries of the training (Savoie-Zajc and Dolbec, 1995).

The written feedback provided by the Principals shows evidence that they have become aware that is it by reflecting on their own practice that they will show the way and encourage their teachers to do the same. Many written comments illustrated it. The following ones are good examples:

> The process has provided me with an opportunity to share experiences and ideas. My colleagues and I were then able to take these ideas and adapt them in our individual schools.
>
> As the year goes on, the staff is beginning to use the same approach. "Reflecting" is happening.

The training sessions have not only contributed to the group learning about leadership, change process and action research, but have also given each one of us confidence in the application of these concepts in the various milieus. Moreover, many School Principals told us that, as facilitators, we put into practice what we were teaching. Many Principals have also mentioned that they have partially or entirely transferred this collaborative approach to management and to leadership into their practice. Our analysis of their feedback shows that they have changed the way they conduct meetings and that they have delegated responsibilities to committees. Many share the evidence that they see themselves becoming change agents in their workplace and they say that they challenge more and more the usual ways to do things. They do not see themselves as being the only ones to know how to do things in their schools and see their role as clarifying the different perspectives and opening the problem solving processes. The following quotation gives an idea of such a change:

> I am more convinced than ever that each professional in the team has all the resources needed to do his job and bring to term the collective projects if I work to support and mobilize them to see our decisions as an opportunity to collaborate and become more cohesive. Each of us knows more than anyone else what is best and significant for him.

An important issue that was made central by the School Principals concerned time. Our initial observations and the transcripts of the sessions provide evidence that the lack of time is a central issue in professional development. Everyone mentioned that they did not have enough. The sessions have given us what Pelletier (1995) calls "pause in time", those breaks needed to better appreciate, name and describe their daily practice. Many Principals wrote that they now have the need to reflect on their own and to take time to do the same with their teachers because they realize the importance of taking into account the time needed for the team to assimilate any new idea. The following quote from one of them illustrates this learning:

> What I have learned: 1) a group must believe in the change for it to happen effectively; 2) I have to listen to the group and be prepared to adjust accordingly and 3) take the time that is needed to ensure objectives are being met and internalized.

2) <u>The learnings of researchers</u>

As researchers, we have also learned from the process. To work as a team teaching/learning/researching unit has helped us to respect the rythm of both groups and to manage our safety needs without imposing too much control on the participants. Together, we could

ensure that we were true to our values and to the principles of action research. Evidence provided by our assistant who observed us during the first year shows that our actions reflected the values put forward in the training. Alone, we would have felt the need to exert more control on the agenda and on the participants and would have surely put the aim of research into the background to focus instead on the means to get there.

> You have indeed put the model into practice. By watching you conduct the sessions, I better understand how to put it into practice with my staff.

We have also learned that to use a collaborative approach in teaching managers, one must be familiar and accept its underlying values. We have insisted on the need to clarify for each other the gaps that exist between our espoused theories and our theories of action (Argyris, 1980). Consequently, we wanted to become witnesses of our theories and values, recognize our living contradictions (Whitehead, 1993), and consent to be questioned by each other on the way we translate our values into practice and how we can succeed in being congruent as actor-researchers. Even if we had contracted that we would bring any contradiction forward, neither of us felt the need to do so in the debriefing sessions that followed each meeting.

3) Action research as a strategy for change

The use of action research as a change strategy is a personal choice made by the researchers. For the last fifteen years, we have been interested in the change processes and in action research in education. We suggested this approach to the participants and invited them to remain critical of it. The planning of the education/learning process within an open and emerging approach was a shock for many. Even if we all shared the importance of using a bottom-up approach, it was hard to tolerate its woolliness and the time it takes for each one to articulate his or her own thinking. At times, we became aware that we were asked to make the decisions for the group and to move forward in order to save time. We have learned, through our own experience, that it is possible to trust a group, that groups are composed of people rich in experience and knowledge and that it was a requirement to bring about support networks to support the change process. We have witnessed an interesting transfer of expertise. At the start, as academic researchers, we were seen as the experts who supposedly had valued knowledge. We were seen as knowing the answer to leadership problems. Through the action research process, the participants have become co-researchers and little by little they have become responsible for the planning cycles and the content as well as the process of the meetings. The resources persons were not uniquely external to the

groups but came from the groups as well. We have done more than learn what to do in the schools as a product of the training sessions. We are now focussing on the change process itself within the context of action research. Many have translated such learnings in their school and used the sessions as models to adapt to their milieu.

> I have used the collaborative approach, re-establishing goals etc. As the year goes on, the staff is beginning to use the same approach. "Reflecting" is happening.

4) The concept of continuous learning as a means to transform the organisational school culture.

As we have already mentioned, the two groups have taken different paths. The analysis of our notes taken during the training sessions show two evolution. The first group, which is homogeneous in the sense that it is composed of all the School Principals from the same School Board, is interested in establishing collaborative modes between the schools. Specific projects have been set up; for example, two schools have joined together to plan their training days. This group is also concerned by the assessment of change. It is a recurring theme that they bring forward at every meeting. How do we assess change? What are the criteria to be considered? How can we implement a continuous evaluation concern in our school?

The second group reframed its understanding of the *school development plan* as the mainspring for change for each school. Many members have shared their expertise regarding this theme with the group. Most of the meetings are focussed around it. They have understood that any plan to implement a learning culture had to be attached to this notion as one comment shows:

> I have used the participative approach with my School Council in the development of the school project. I try as much as possible to start with the needs of the people, to find solutions that come from them. The action research group is good at listening to me and validating what I do and at listening to others.

Both groups are in the process of transferring their learning into their practice. We are foreseeing the possibility of starting a new group in the Autumn 1996 following the success of this experience. A formal evaluation of the whole project is also planned for 1997. It will then be interesting to check how the learning culture put forward through the action research is not an obstacle to the integration of new people. As a matter of fact, Hargeaves (1996) writes that collaboration between the actors is based on the sharing of common values and compatible cultures. Is it the case in the present research?

Conclusion

Through this research, we have put a collaborative training and research process similar to action research into place. This research reflects many characteristics of a partnership: collaboration between the researchers and actors was intensive throughout the sessions, the planning rested on a continuous monitoring process of the learning needs and was done in collaboration. It is interesting to note that both groups have followed very different paths. The sharing of expertise happened among all the participants involved: the starting point was the experience of each one. This personal knowledge was valued and has allowed us to recognize each other's strengths: be it in problem-solving, in planning, in mediating, in particular working techniques. Throughout the training, we have respected the people's needs, the training evolving with the trajectory that was taking form. After many months of conversation, of team work, of shared reflections, we can say that it evolved according to our aspirations. The following quotations coming from two participants shows the evidence:

> I have gained self-confidence and feel more assured when I have to do something. I am certain not to be alone in doing something in the school. We are living the school together and this fits the school orientations to foster autonomy and responsibility.

> I feel more confident in my role as an administrator and I'm involved in the process of change with my staff. I've become more of a risk-taker and hope that this will become obvious to my staff. The theory learnt gives me more basis for my action.

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